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ABSTRACT

This review traces the history of the public library's role in the diffusion of information about American culture, surveys the influence of that role on library education, and describes five models which reflect the range of cultural roles presently being fulfilled in libraries and which identify the knowledge and skills librarians need to support cultural activities. The functions of the five models are stated as follows: (1) to serve the arts information needs of the community, (2) to provide a showcase for the arts in the local community, (3) to facilitate arts program coordination among community organizations, (4) to provide outreach centers for the community's cultural agencies, and (5) to stimulate the consideration of public issues in the light of humanistic values. (FM)

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# THE CULTURAL ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1920-1980, AND ITS IMPACT ON LIBRARY EDUCATION

by

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# THE CULTURAL ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY, 1920-1980, AND ITS IMPACT ON LIBRARY EDUCATION

It is obvious that thirty minutes on this awesome topic can -- providentially - allow time only for highlights and challenges, to which you are to be asked to respond. So my plan is to trace quickly some key periods in public library thinking about its cultural role, parallel these with the thinking and practice of library education at those key moments, and then conclude with a more detailed look at the current scene.

My sources for the historical review of public library thinking and practice were such landmark documents as Learned's The American Public Library and the Diffusion of Knowledge (1924)., Lowell Martin's "The American Public Library as a Social Institution" (1937), Robert Leigh's Public Library in the United States (1950), and Public Library Standards throughout the period, together with such historical research into public library thinking and practice as Robert Ellis Lee's Continuing Education for Adults through the American Public Library, 1833-1964, and my own Library Adult Education: The Biography of an Idea covering the period 1920 to 1955.

The review of library education will rely on basic documents such as C. C. Williamson's Training for Library Work (1921), Ernest J. Reece's The Curriculum in Library Schools (1936), Lester Asheim's The Core of Education for Librarianship (1954), Asheim's summary of the Allerton Conference on Training Needs of Librarians Doing Adult Education Work (1955), and Anna Hall's "Selected Educational Objectives for Public Service Librarians"(1968). Detailed contemporary documentation is available from two textbooks prepared for library education: Jennie Flexner's Circulation Work in Public Libraries (1927)

and Lester Asheim's The Humanities and the Library (1957), as well as the ALA Standards for Accreditation for 1933, 1951, and 1972. These primary sources were supplemented by overviews of library education's support to adult education for this period, these overviews having been done by Miriam Tompkins in 1937, Sigrid Edge in 1946, myself in 1956, and Nancy Freeman Rohde in 1971.

The current scene has been drawn not only from a cluster of current overviews of public library philosophy and practice, but I shall also share with you the findings from my journey of inquiry on the cultural role of the public library conducted in 1979 with 13 public libraries in nine states throughout the country. The purpose of my inquiry was to sophisticate my own thinking about the cultural role of the public library, to develop conceptual models which reflect the range of cultural role now being fulfilled in public libraries, and to identify the knowledge and skills needed in staff.

Let me justify my heavy dependence upon adult education as well as the arts and the humanities as sources for thinking about "cultural role." Quite consistently over the decades, librarians have referred to the information, education, and recreation functions of the public library as fulfilling the library's cultural role. "Cultural role" is referred to more typically when one discusses "library mission" rather than particular library programs or library function. Pierce Butler, in 1933, used the sociologist's definition of culture and saw culture as "essentially a social cumulation of experience whereby men of each generation possess potentially at least, all that their predecessors have ever learned. Books are one social mechanism for preserving the racial memory, and the library one social apparatus for transferring this to the consciousness of living individuals." Learned in 1924 had given this transfer of culture an information context: he saw the library as an "intelligence center," at which "readable syllabi" (note the language of education!) would enable the layman to acquire "in a few hours" a comprehensive view of such a topic, for example, as modern American poetry and its significance. The public library functions of "sifting and condensing of knowledge" to make it available to each generation was seen by Learned and by Butler as both information and education, yet the product was clearly to "transmit the culture." Library adult education, arising out of this context, has been one of the modes used by public libraries to discharge its responsibilities for cultural diffusion and cultural stimulation.

Jennie Flexner in 1927, in writing directly for library school students, in the context of a discussion of the "adult education function" of readers advisory service, commented that the function of the public library is not primarily the circulation of books but rather "the dissemination of ideas, the advancement of learning," and saw that a community-oriented advisory librarian working with a good collection of books, "could not fail" to ensure that the library would have "a definite cultural effect."

At the same time that the 1920's saw "cultural role" in terms of overall mission and impact of the total intellectual content of a society, there was also a sense in which culture was seen at a second level: that of the classical "high culture," with stress on the arts: literary, visual, and performing arts, and sometimes such applied arts as architecture, furniture, textiles. Flexner refers to the importance of the library as a center for information on "all educational and cultural activities," and here begins the linkage of (but distinction between) "educational" and "cultural" activities. These distinctions over the decades have come to separate the formal learning situations, especially those stressing sustained learning and learner-instructor feedback, as educational, from the cultural activities as less formal, more entertaining, spontaneous events. As one staff member said to me in 1979, "Culture is what makes life fun."

These two definitions of "cultural role" remain operative in 1980. Top administrators in public library, whose orientation is strongly "mission" find it relatively easy to define the "cultural role" of the public library broadly, while staff serving the expert in the arts field tend to define it more narrowly into an information service, and staff serving the layman public more usually use the term "educational services" and leave the statement of "mission" and cultural role to the library directors!

It is not surprising, therefore, to see that when library educators discuss the curriculum, the term "culture" is not often used, and that the more concrete knowledges and skills which they are concerned to provide to library school students are thought of as related to information, reference, advisory, and group services--the skills which the novice must master. In Ernest J. Reece's stellar analysis of The Curriculum in Library Schools (1936), Reece's outlines of curriculum tend to focus on procedures, skills, and knowledges that relate to selection, acquisition and organization

of collections; information and advisory services; and administration. In none of the outlines is there reference to cultural role, only to information and education functions. Reece's concerns for "cultural subjects", like the concerns of the library educators before him, focussed on ridding the library school curriculum of "cultural courses" designed to make up for weak student backgrounds in the liberal arts, and to insist on high standards of cultural background for students at the point of admission to library school. This would free the curriculum to focus on "technical matters of librarianship."

Miriam Tompkins, also a library educator wrote at about the same time (1937) on "Adult Education and the Library School Curriculum". She gave "adult education" as broad a scope as is currently given "cultural role," --including assistance in learning programs, cooperating with other agencies in programs, combining educational and recreational functions, deepening of interests, improving taste. She cited a new course "The Public Library in Adult Education" and quoted its description from the Columbia University catalog: "This course is concerned primarily with the place of the public library in the cultural life of America." The course was to include attention to social trends, organization of the library to promote cultural development, and book selection. While Tompkins saw the curriculum as giving implicit rather than explicit preparation for the cultural tasks of the public library, she herself took steps to make explicit preparation available. And for Tompkins there was a close linkage between the cultural mission and the education function. While Tompkins was a unique and single voice, nevertheless her impact on the development of adult services with educational and cultural functions in public libraries has been of major importance.

The eternal dualism of public library philosophy, whether phrased as the double role of discovery and diffusion of knowledge, or the balancing functions of the public library seen by Lowell Martin

in 1937 as both social control and social innovation, or the internal ambivalence identified by Dee Garrison in her 1979 Apostles of Culture, as "the censorship and the consumership models of the library" (give people what they ought to have vs. give people what they want) -- such dualism has its own shapes in the area of cultural role. Rosemary DuMont's 1977 expression of this in her Reform & Reaction dualism is that of serving both "short-term wants" and "long-term needs," which leads to competition between "building scholarly collections" and "serving the masses."

There has been exhibited in our profession over the decades a frustration with the diversity of responsibilities, and a tendency to force the issue by demanding to know of the public library, "Well, which do you want?" This "either/or"ism overlooks the nature of most human enterprise. Family priorities in budget and time must be set: mother's advanced degree, father's professional advancement, the children's education and social growth. "Either/or-ism" might function to set short-term emphases, but long-term goals cannot afford the either/or solution. Appreciation of ethnic cultures and of mass culture has generally appeared in library education in the context of "understanding the public of the public library," occasionally as a way of reaching the branch library "neighborhood" population with the popular arts; occasionally as a way to identify those aspects of popular culture which are making their way, as jazz has made its way, into the regard of critics. On the whole, popular arts are seen as hobbies or recreation rather than "culture," and as such have received a respectable niche in the public library service repertoire.

The role of the public library in the education of taste has been recognized as latent since George Ticknor's famous dictums in the 1847 Report of the Boston Public Library. The education of taste was an assumed position in the literary arts until the early twentieth century, although it was a policy often more honored in the breach than in the observance. The illustrious series of basic documents integrating the changes in public librarianship of the 30's into the post-WWII vision of the future formalized the statements of public library goals to include: education, information, aesthetic appreciation, research, and recreation (as Joeckel and Winslow presented them in the 1948 National Plan for Public Library Services.) Robert Leigh's elaboration of these in the 1950 volume of the Public Library Inquiry expanded on "aesthetic appreciation" in reflecting the consensus view of 110 public librarians queried. The role in aesthetic appreciation, Leigh reported, was "To seek to give people an opportunity to improve their capacity for appreciation and production in cultural fields." Whether this meant expansion of tastes or elevation of tastes was not elaborated upon.

Lowell Martin, in the preface to the National Plan of 1948, identified among the varied areas in which public librarians' leadership was needed the area of "promoting appreciation of the cultural output of the twentieth century, presumably to expand the appreciations of the community as a whole. Lester Asheim, in summarizing the Chicago conference on The Core of Education for Librarianship a few years later (in 1954), gave shape to the group conversation in phrasing the "functions of the library in society": access to the recorded experience of the race; advance knowledge through research; assemble and organize information for practical living; serve as an integral part of formal education; serve as an instrument of enlightenment and informal education, and "contribute to the awakening inspiration and development of the individual." From the diversity of definitions of cultural role now available to public librarians, "cultural role" might be said to be involved in all six of these functions.

Asheim did not use the term "culture" or "cultural role" in his summary of the Core Curriculum, nor in the next year's summary of the Allerton Park conference on Training Needs of Librarians Doing Adult Education Work (1955). A search in his 1954 volume on The Humanities and the Library likewise shows that he dealt with the concreteness of "fine arts" and "music" within the "humanities", and discusses the "mission" of the library in these fields in such specific terms as development of research and reading collections; reference assistance to artists, art experts, art students, and laymen; and the possible goal of "deliberate effort to elevate public taste" as a choice of an individual public library.

When Anna C. Hall studied in 1968 the skills that public service librarians in public libraries were prized for by their supervisors, the cultural tasks did not appear separately designated, and were alluded to only as illustrations of more generic services; and library education's response was in terms of collections rather than of services.

It seems fair to say, in summary, that by 1970, the cultural role of the public library was recognized at a broad mission level with few implementing goals and objectives, except as the information and education functions involved a cultural impact; and that library education itself dealt with the educational and cultural functions more usually on an implicit rather than an explicit level.

Let me share with you now what I found in my conversations with well over 100 persons in the 13 communities whose public libraries I explored for their cultural role: Tuscon, Phoenix, Tulsa, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, New York, Boston, and Dallas, with smaller communities in Massachusetts, Texas and Wisconsin. There is no question that the cultural role of public libraries in the United States in 1980 had been very responsive to the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities; their guidelines for financial grants have molded or modified the thinking of many public librarians. Library leaders have undoubtedly lent their insight to the foundations, and a number have maintained clear personal insight into the values and directions they envision for libraries in this area.

Influential as the national endowments have been through their financial aid and counseling, librarians have, nevertheless, made of the cultural programs creations uniquely librarianship. The interviews I conducted with museum directors, historical society educational staff, with little theatre, symphony, and dance groups, in general confirm that libraries are being libraries and making their cultural impact in library-type fashion: information service to the specialists; collections activated through lively programming for children, students, organizations, and small neighborhood groups; broad and effective exhibitions given high visibility through major events in the city as a whole; and service as a channel of communication from the world of the arts to that public which is particularly the world of library users.

I have identified five models that embody the cultural role of the public library in 1980. Any one library may combine two or more in its own style, but the spectrum I think is here in the five models. Each requires a distinct organizational structure, most of them already in place in large metropolitan public libraries, but in smaller libraries, individual staff take "project" responsibility.

Model I Function: To serve the arts information needs of the community

a. To serve the information needs of the experts: artists, critics, students (The real research needs, on the other hand, are typically met in university and institute libraries)
b. To serve the information and reading needs of the educated public
c. To provide books and other materials to support amateur art activities (painting, little theatre, needlework, choral singing, etc.)

The SUBJECT DEPARTMENT (or subject specialist with a depth arts collection) tends to be the locus of these activities.

Model II Function: To provide a "showcase" for the arts in the local community.

a. To create a stage for the local aspiring artist, encouraging new talent that can benefit from interaction with an audience and the experience of art criticism (dance, theatre, music, poetry readings, etc.) New York Public Library's program at Lincoln Center is only one example.
b. To elevate the taste and widen the appreciation of the arts within the lay community not usually exposed to the arts.
c. To provide a central meeting place for social/professional communication among the several art networks in a large community. Boston Public Library's "wine and cheese" parties that accompany their Openings are important art events in the city.

The CULTURAL CENTER tends to be the locus for this function, although on a miniature scale, branch neighborhood libraries can also serve this function.

Models I and II may be provided in the same unit, but typically in 1979 they were not, due primarily to an "either/or" orientation of staff in the central library. Boston's fine experience of combining the two, however, documents the value in such combination.

Model III Function: To facilitate arts program coordination among community organizations and groups.

a. To bring library resources, information, and programming expertise to the arts and humanities groups of the community.
b. To offer the public library's network of communication with its users to other cultural groups of the community.
c. To support broad community planning for the arts.

The CULTURAL PROGRAMS COORDINATOR tends to be the locus of these activities. Susan Goldberg's work from the Tucson Public Library was acknowledged gladly as of outstanding leadership quality by all the cultural agencies interviewed in Tucson.

Model IV Function: To provide "outreach centers" for the cultural agencies of the community.

a. Branch libraries, neighborhood or community libraries, serve as hosts to gallery shows, musical events, museum exhibitions of artifacts of history, art or science -- carrying cultural experiences to people in a way to extend the influence of these agencies.

The BRANCH LIBRARY AND SERVICE COORDINATORS tend to be the persons responsible for stimulating and arranging these events. The King County (Washington) Arts Council Board President was most emphatic about this important function of public libraries in times of energy shortage and limited cultural agency budgets.

Model V Function: To stimulate the consideration of public issues in the light of humanistic values, building such values into the everyday culture of our society.

a. Provide sequences of lectures, panels, discussion groups, exhibitions that tie the humanities and cultural values of philosophy, religion, and the literary arts to particular public issue themes.

SPECIAL PROJECTS DIRECTOR or CULTURAL PROGRAMS COORDINATOR tend to be the locus for such a function. National Endowment for the Humanities has made a number of grants for programming of this sort. CULTURAL CENTER SUBJECT DEPARTMENT sponsorship is equally suitable.

A fuller development of these models, set in the framework of a complete report on the investigation of the Cultural Role of the Public Library will appear in a forthcoming (1981) issue of Advances in Librarianship.

How, then, do these five models relate to library education? I inquired of librarians with whom I talked "What do you look for as you seek staff to carry out the cultural role of your library?" and "What do you think library education should do to prepare people to fulfill the cultural role of the public library?" I bring you their message!

IMPORTANT QUALIFICATIONS OF LIBRARIANS TO SERVE THE CULTURAL ROLE

1. Leadership qualities in the arts community
   - Credibility as a professional working in the cultural arts
   - Broad acquaintance with the arts, but with at least one cultural arts area developed in depth
   - Personal sophistication and an inquiring mind in the arts
2. Strong personal avocation in the arts
   - Function as part of the arts network in the community
   - Have long-nurtured cultural interests
3. Flexibility and creativity
4. Be ready to be a vital part of the community
   - Serve on committees
   - Know who people are and maintain a wide range of contacts
   - Be people-oriented
   - Have community group skills to bring to the common task
5. Communicate well
   - Be able to meet with people of all kinds ("corporations, staff, man in street)
   - Represent the library well
   - Have group process skills: be a good facilitator
   - Competent in public speaking; think well on one's feet
   - Writing skills at a high level: public relations, publicity, book interpretation, etc.

That is an impressive but not surprising list of qualities. How can library education respond to this need? At the moment, many people are being added to public library staffs without library education because they have the personal qualities or special arts backgrounds,

but library administrators profess often to prefer people with those same talents but also with library orientation. Is this a matter of recruitment to library education as well, perhaps, as a change in style of library education that might allow experiential education that would develop or release special talents?

WHAT SHOULD LIBRARY EDUCATION DO?

1. Provide Administration and Planning Skills
   - Management skills
   - Analytical skills ("staff are paid to think")
   - Arts administration skills, now available in schools of business
2. Have a Positive Recruitment Program
   - Seek people with art specialty or depth in humanities (history, literature, philosophy)
   - Require people to have strong liberal arts background if they are to enter public librarianship
   - Foreign language skills needed both for scholarly materials and for interaction with people of varied cultural backgrounds
3. Develop a Two-Year Masters Program (!)
   - Consider formal admission to a "public library sequence"
   - Make space for more interdisciplinary study
   - Plan joint Masters programs with arts administration, and with other art specialties
4. Provide a Sound Preparation in Service Skills
   - Programming skills
   - Public Relations skills
   - Group process skills for planning and community agency contacts

In short, public librarians are calling for explicit preparation of librarians for cultural role tasks. When Anna Hall surveyed library schools in the late 1960's she found almost no instruction that moved beyond the level of "orienting" students to an area of public service; public librarians are asking now for competence in analysis, application, and judgment in areas of complex tasks.